

CORE

DESIGNING MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: A CASE STUDY

DR. HAMID S. ATIYYAH Management Consultant, Damascus

Introduction

The shortage of qualified and skilled manpower remains a major problem for many developing countries. The insufficient supply of competent management talent is especially recognised as a major constraint on development and modernisation programmes in these countries. In addition to management education courses offered by the universities, training institutes have been established to provide managers with the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, implement and manage development programmes. It was inevitable for these training institutes to turn to their counterparts in Western industrial countries for management training know-how.

Most conceptual and empirical studies in the field of management education and training were conducted in developed countries. Methods and techniques in this field were also developed in organisations based in these countries, and hence have their roots in the work attitudes and values prevalent in them. Although their universality has yet to be tested, these concepts and techniques have been transferred to developing countries and in some cases without first adapting them to the local cultural and organisational conditions. The low effectiveness of management training in Arab countries has been ascribed to this, as well as other factors such as unsupportive attitudes among Arab managers, the absence of clear policies, the shortage of competent trainers, and inadequate facilities (El-Fathaly and Chackerian, 1983; Al-Tayeb, 1984).

The objective of this article is to describe and analyse the experience of the Saudi Arabian Institute of Public Administration in applying modern concepts and methods in designing its management training programmes. Most studies on management training and education in Arab countries are regrettably impressionistic and provide few insights on how Arab institutes actually carry out their functions and achieve their goals. While using the case approach has obvious limitations, this eye-witness account offers a unique view of the internal operations of the Saudi Arabian Institute in designing its management training programmes in 1986.

The Setting

Saudi Arabia is an Arab country favoured with a sparse population and enormous oil wealth, but it is handicapped by a severe shortage of qualified and skilled manpower. As a temporary solution, it resorted to employing large numbers of foreign managers, professionals and labourers. At the same time, substantial funds were invested in education and training to achieve the long-term objective of manpower self-sufficiency (Atiyyah, 1990).

In 1961, the Saudi Arabian government, acting upon the advice of a UN expert, established the Institute of Public Administration in Riyadh as a semi-autonomous agency to perform three major functions: providing management consultation to public agencies, conducting applied research, and training civil servants. The Institute is probably the best equipped and staffed of the major 18 public training institutes in Arab countries. Obtaining the funds necessary to expand and improve its operations has been relatively easy. Its annual budget increased from Saudi riyal 1.3 million in 1961 to 182.9 million in 1985 (US\$= SR 3.75). In 1982, the Institute moved its headquarters to a new functionally-designed building equipped with the latest state-of-the-art training technology including closed circuit television, facilities for producing training films, and computer systems. Also, the number of its trainers and other professional staff rose from seven in 1961 to 537 in 1989. However, a large percentage of these – 47% in 1989 – are Arab expatriates, employed on a one-year contract basis.

Quantitative indicators of its achievements are also impressive. For example, the number of public managers and employees attending the Institute's programmes between 1961 and 1989 exceeded 60,000 (Al-Tawail, 1989). With regard to training quality, however, the Institute's achievements appear to be less than satisfactory. Al-Tawail (1985), the incumbent Director General of the Institute, reported that 60% of a sample of senior public managers in Arab Gulf countries described local training as being 'ineffective', and 73% indicated that its impact on performance has been marginal. In a recently-published paper, Al-Tawail (1989) argued that upgrading training is inhibited by a number of obstacles. These problems include external constraints as well as internal deficiencies such as an over-emphasis on theory in curricula and insufficient training material. One of the measures undertaken to rectify this situation was the establishment of the Programme Design and Development Department (PDDD) in 1986.

New Programmes' Designs

Soon after its establishment, the PDDD was given the major assignment of reviewing the curricula of in-service training programmes. The DG made it clear that he wanted a thorough in-depth review of current programmes and that the final report must indicate which of these programmes were to be continued, and the objectives, contents and length of each programme. He stressed the need to design practical rather than academic programmes

responsive to the needs and conditions in the Saudi Arabian public sectors.

A few weeks later, the PDDD submitted a preliminary report outlining two alternative approaches to carry out this assignment. The first alternative identified the need for a comprehensive assessment of training needs by conducting extensive field surveys before work on designing the new curricula could begin. The second approach was based on the assumption that the participation of senior public managers in the review process would help in designing new programmes which were more practical and suitable to actual needs than current programmes. Obviously, the second alternative required less time and money for its implementation. It was also the alternative endorsed by the DG.

The official reason for choosing this alternative was revealed in a meeting of staff members assigned to this project. In replying to criticisms of the endorsed approach raised in this meeting, the PDDD staff stated that they were in favour of the first approach because it was more objective and systematic. However, the second alternative was chosen because it adhered to the time limit imposed by the DG. Nevertheless, they argued that it was the best choice given the time constraint and the lack of sufficient information on training needs.

A number of teams were formed to carry out this project, and I was assigned to the team responsible for the general management programmes including the foundation, middle and upper courses.

Implementation

The PDDD had prepared detailed implementation and time schedules for the project consisting of three phases as described below.

Phase I: Preparing the draft curricula. In this phase, the teams were expected to review current training programmes in the light of available information and their members' experience, and using the following guidelines:

- specify the objectives of each programme;
- lay down minimum entrance requirements (education, experience, grade, special skills etc.);
- choose the subjects to be included in each programme that would best achieve these objectives;
- divide each subject into units;
- specify the behavioural objectives (knowledge, skills, attitudes) of each unit;
- divide each unit into themes or topics, and determine whether these involve knowledge or skill training;
- specify the time required for each topic and add up the time for all units within a subject, and finally calculate the length of the programme;
- choose the training technique(s), i.e. lecture, discussion groups, extra-classroom activities, suitable for each topic;

- determine the training material (handouts, cases, films) needed for each topic.

This was presented as a textbook-based rigorous methodology featuring the best and most advanced concepts and techniques in curriculum design in developed countries. Unlike previous curricula designs in which the choice of a methodology was left to the discretion of the staff, there was to be strict adherence to this uniform methodology by all teams. However, some staff members were not impressed by this because, they argued, it offered no solution to the problem of lack of information on training needs. They also pointed out that training materials were inadequate and that this constituted a strong constraint on the choice of training techniques. In reply, the PDDD urged everyone to do his or her best using all available information and material. One cynical participant confidentially commented that 'they want us to dress up the old curricula'.

Phase II: Amending the draft curricula. In this phase a number of senior civil servants were to be invited to take part in discussing the draft curricula and to suggest improvements on them. Three senior officials with the rank of DG participated in the deliberations of our team.

Phase III: Final review and approval by DG. In the third and final phase, the amended draft curricula were submitted to DG's Deputy for Training and then to the DG for a final review and endorsement.

Dressing Up Old Curricula

During implementation, deficiencies in the applied methodology could be more clearly recognised and these constituted major obstacles to the successful completion of this project. Lacking sufficient and reliable information on needs, participants, and the Saudi Arabian civil service in general, the teams' work could only be incremental and subjective. It was incremental because a fresh start was unthinkable and the current programmes had to be accepted as the bases for developing the new curricula. Reliance on subjective criteria led to the dilemma of having to choose between suggesting significant curriculum changes which would be difficult to defend, or simply maintaining the status quo. Dressing up the old curricula was the middle course chosen by the teams.

For the same reasons, significant issues could not be settled by these teams and were consequently referred to higher authority. For example, our team failed to reach an answer to a question raised by the DG regarding the classification of the Foundation Management Programme as an in-service or a preparatory (pre-service) programme. Opinions also differed on whether the Institute should continue to offer both general and specialised management programmes or either of the two types of programmes. General programmes include management topics only, while specialised programmes catered for the special needs of functional managers, e.g. personnel managers. Some were convinced that duplication could be reduced if general programmes were discontinued but it was finally decided to maintain the current situation

because not all managers' needs were met by the specialised programmes.

Another controversy arose regarding the role of the senior civil servants invited to take part in our meetings. They were unwilling to participate in a detailed review of the voluminous draft curricula, explaining that their work commitments prevented this. Instead, they were prepared to discuss general programmes' objectives leaving 'details', i.e. programme contents, to us. Consequently, opinions contributed by them were of a general nature and their usefulness was limited.

Hidden Motives?

After several months of hard work by various teams made up of the Institute's staff members and senior civil servants, the new curricula were now ready. This was proclaimed as a radical departure from previous attempts at designing training curricula in the Institute and a major success. Admittedly, some changes were introduced including the discontinuation of one general management programme and some improvements may have actually been realised. Whether these modest achievements justify the time and money expended on this project is difficult to ascertain here. However, the claim that the applied design methodology is sound and feasible can be disputed.

In addition to being methodologically suspect, resorting to senior civil servants as informants on training needs proved to be unrewarding. In the author's view, better results would have been achieved if the first alternative proposed by PDDD had been chosen by the DG. As mentioned earlier, the second alternative was adopted because it was less time consuming. However, another explanation reflecting the nature of relationships between public agencies is suggested by the DG's published works. In discussing major problems encountered by the Institute, Al-Tawail (1989) stressed the lack of information on training needs. He also pointed out that responsibility for assessing these needs, or failing to do so, falls elsewhere.

Training functions in the Saudi Arabian public service are divided among a number of agencies. The Institute is responsible for designing and conducting training programmes. The Training Committee, of which the DG is a prominent member, is responsible for laying down training policies and plans for the public sector. Organisation development (OD) units within major public agencies are expected to draw up training plans for their agencies on the basis of needs analysis.

Al-Tawail (1989) was critical of the Training Committee's failure to perform its vital role in the training process, and although the number of OD units has steadily increased, their number and resources remain below what is required for a comprehensive and systematic training needs analysis. The PDDD's proposal to assess these needs, i.e. the first alternative, may have been rejected because it encroached on other agencies' jurisdiction and required the diversion of much of the Institute's resources.

While recourse to senior civil servants as informants was an unfortunate choice of methodology, it certainly had its advantages. As mentioned earlier, Al-Tawail (1985) reported that a large proportion of a sample of managers from Arab Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, were dissatisfied with training in their countries. Also, the Institute has been repeatedly accused of designing its programmes in its 'ivory-tower' conference rooms. Thus even if the new curricula are not more realistic and responsive to needs, the participation of these officials in their design provided the Institute with a strong defence against such allegations.

The possibility that they were invited to take part in pseudo-consultation rather than real consultation did not escape the minds of these officials. One of them threatened to boycott our meetings unless his suggestions were given due attention and consideration. Another official suspected that their 'nominal' participation was desired only to bestow legitimacy on the Institute's programmes. They were also unhappy that their decisions were to be treated by the DG, who was their equal in hierarchical rank, as mere recommendations.

In the pseudo-consultative style, subordinates or participants are apparently consulted but only those opinions which agree with the superior's analysis are actually taken into consideration (Ali, 1989). This style is frequently practised in boards of directors dominated by their chairmen. In one unusual case, the chairman, tired of monthly meetings with his board members, began to take the decisions himself and then send them to the members to sign.

Not surprisingly, many of the significant issues in the design process were decided by top management even before the teams submitted their reports. For example, a reduction in the length of some programmes was ordered to enable the Institute to increase its training capacity by adding a new training term. Suspicious staff members thought that this was entirely motivated by top management's desire to maintain the upward direction of the graph line representing the number of training graduates.

No official explanation was provided for the decision to reduce the number of general management programmes from three to two, but there was no shortage of speculation on the real hidden motive behind it. One story alleged that the decision was taken to reduce cost while another hinted at the controversy regarding one of these courses, i.e. the Foundation Management Programme, mentioned earlier. In the absence of true participation and open communication channels between upper and lower echelons, the spread of rumours and speculations was to be expected.

Conclusions

Establishing an organisational unit to help in designing and improving training curricula and evaluation methods was undoubtedly a step in the right direction. However, it was not enough. Better results would have been

achieved if it had been provided with the necessary competent manpower and other resources, and if the value of its technical advice had been recognised. Indeed, one of the critical factors which impeded the successful completion of this project was the shortage of competent and experienced staff. A majority of the Institute's trainers, including most of those who took part in this project, had no previous experience in the public service. They were well informed about modern management concepts and practices such as quality circles, management information systems and MBO, but they lacked the experience, information and research results to enable them to design training courses, techniques and materials responsive to the needs and characteristics of the Saudi Arabian civil service.

The influence of culture and other situational factors on the design process must also be considered here. In this oil-rich country, it has proved possible to build a modern infrastructure, expand and operate large public and private sectors and provide citizens with the best available services even without the necessary indigenous manpower and technical know-how. This has resulted in the widespread belief that feasible and fast solutions can be found to almost any problem and bought with money. Although the dangers of over-reliance on foreign labour and expertise have been recently recognised and the gradual replacement of expatriates with nationals has begun in earnest, the search continues for fast solutions in order to catch up with the rest of the world and make up for centuries of lost time. Sufficient funds are necessary for the effective design and application of management development programmes, but competent trainers, motivated participants and efficient systems to operate, evaluate and adapt these programmes on a continuous basis are also essential.

In conclusion, this case has illustrated some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to transfer modern training concepts and techniques to a developing country. Failure to recognise critical interdependencies with other public agencies in implementing this project was a major shortcoming. Instead of arguing over who should be responsible for the lack of information on training needs, the Institute should have tried to reach an understanding with concerned agencies in order to obtain a steady flow of reliable information on needs. Other problems such as the unrealistic time limit imposed, a work atmosphere which discouraged the free exchange of ideas and opinions, and the staff's inadequate experience in this field made the successful completion of this project even more difficult.

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ADDRESS FOR REPRINTS

Dr. Hamid S. Atiyyah, Management Consultant, P.O. Box 25503, Damascus, Syria